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ABSTRACT

PROBE (Potential Reentry Opportunities in Business and Education), a program conducted in Harrisburg and Lebanon, Pennsylvania, incorporated technological training with effective communication skills preparation for single female welfare parents. Goals of the program were to provide 20 single-parent welfare women with marketable computer and communication skills to enable them to gain entry-level positions paying at least $6.50 per hour and to provide employers with productive, competent employees. Funding was provided by a variety of state education and labor agencies during the 3 years of the program. Classes were held at the Penn State Harrisburg campus from September through May. In the computer segment, participants met with trainers 2 days weekly and learned DOS, word processing, Lotus, database use, and desktop publishing. The communications skills model evolved over the years, with a basic grammar text, individual attention, and a focus on standard English in the classroom for letters, memos, and reports and on telephone skills. In the third year, the learners created their own text instead of using the grammar book, and a reading segment was added. Before completing the program, the women prepared resumes and practiced interviewing skills. In the first year, 18 of the 20 women successfully completed the program and were employed. In the third year, however, the percentage of welfare recipients in the program increased to 90 percent, and there was a more uneven mix of skill levels. The PROBE program was judged to be effective in preparing low-income women for work and job advancement through improvement in communication skills. (KC)

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Preparing Low Income Women for Today's Workplace: A Case Study on the Evolution of a Communications Model Within a Job Training Program

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Introduction

The Hudson Institute report, Workforce 2000, notable among the workplace studies during the 1980s, indicated the need for employees skilled in reading, writing and critical thinking abilities within an evolving technological environment. The report also projected an influx of women workers at a time when legislation was being enacted and/or implemented to provide job training that would promote a transition from dependence to self sufficiency, especially for the female single parent.

Challenged by such information, PROBE, Potential Reentry Opportunities in Business and Education, a non-profit single parent/displaced homemaker program, decided to explore the feasibility of designing a program for single female welfare parents that would incorporate some aspect of technological training with effective communication skills preparation.

Setting

PROBE, in its 14th year of operation, offers career counseling and job readiness classes to single parents and displaced homemakers in the Cumberland, Dauphin, Lebanon and Perry counties at its Harrisburg and Lebanon, PA sites. Its director, Kathryn Towns, is a professor of Comunity Psychology and Women's Studies at Pennsylvania State University Harrisburg. She and Irene Baird, a PROBE staff member and regional leader for the Washington, DC-based Women's Work Force Network, Wider Opportunities for Women, assessed the literature and legislation. They consulted with experts and leaders at agencies such as the Women's Bureau, the Department of Labor; the Central Pennsylvania Ben Franklin Technology Center; the Pennsylvania Department of Education, Vocational

Education, and Penn State Harrisburg Continuing Education. They also noted that many local newspaper job listings specified among the qualifications competency in computer and communication skills. Based on these assessments, the decision was made to initiate, in 1987, a Personal Computer/Communication Skills program to train single parent welfare women who completed 120 hours of PROBE's job readiness preparation.

Other factors, in addition to the available student pool, that weighed strongly in favor of seeking funding for such an undertaking were:

a. the desire to offer this pool of adult learners the opportunity to expand its learning experience in an area that could provide greater remuneration and potential for advancement than the customary minimum wage job;

b. the availability/accessibility of computers at the Penn State Harrisburg site;

c. the expectation that, if successful, such training would constitute a form of economic development in the capital region;

d. the availability of a coordinator, Irene Baird, who would also create and facilitate the communications segment, the focus of this study.

Outcomes

The primary goals of the program were

- to provide 20 single parent welfare women with marketable computer and communication skills to enable them to gain entry level positions at no less than $6.50 hourly;

- to provide employers with productive, competent employees in an evolving technological work world.

The need for such a program was determined by several factors, including:

1. newspaper job listings that specified among the qualifications competency in computer and communication skills;

2. research results (Hudson Institute report, Workforce 2000, the most frequently quoted) indicating inadequate job preparation among current workers and demographic changes projecting an influx of women workers, many of them single parents;

3. legislation designed to provide job training for the underserved and most difficult to place that would promote a transition from welfare to self-sufficiency.

Funding Sources

Funders included:

1. Year One, 1988-1989, the Pennsylvania Department of Education, Vocational Education, in cooperation with Penn State Harrisburg's Continuing Education division;

2. Year Two, 1989-1990, the Pennsylvania Department of Commerce through a Ben Franklin Technology grant;

3. Year Three, 1990-1991, the Pennsylvania Departments of Labor & Industry, Public Welfare, Commerce, and Education through a Job Link grant.

Process

Classes were held at the Penn State Harrisburg campus from September through May. In the computer segment, which was sub-contracted, the participants met with trainers two days weekly; the format, which included DOS,

Word Processing, Lotus, Data Base, desk top publishing, and basic PC programming, was similar each year. Progress was determined by the degree of competency individual learners achieved.

It was in the communications segment that the format evolved to accommodate the changing composition and academic backgrounds of the classes. The computer learning, though structured, was important to the communications class; the computers served to reinforce communication exercises, whenever applicable.

Communication Skills. The Evolution of a Model

The intent in this segment was to provide the participants with learning skills and experiences, along with supportive counseling from a PROBE staff member, within a setting that simulated a work site. The program was a "safe haven," however, one that allowed for trial and error with enough structure to encourage productivity and a sense of responsibility.

During the first two years, a basic grammar text served primarily as a resource for review purposes because most participants indicated in their original writing samples an adequate knowledge of standard English. The size of the class allowed for individual attention whenever needed or requested. There was never an attempt to alter community speech patterns outside the classroom; within the class, however, the focus was on standard English, on memos, letters and reports that were intended to communicate the message clearly and understandably for a business setting. Telephone skills and interaction with potential customers, clients and other employees were enacted through role play. In an informal atmosphere, once trust had been established,

participants shared difficult or problem situations encountered in previous places of employment.

As part of the preparation, the women visited sites that used various kinds of computers, and were encouraged to "communicate," to question the Personnel Office employee who provided the tour. At some sites the women were allowed to question other employees in order to gain some insights about the nature of their work.

Prior to the completion of the program, the participants prepared professional looking résumés and practiced interviewing skills with community human resources representatives who volunteered their services. To round out the preparation, sessions were held on appropriate dress and behavior for the market place. An added dimension that incorporated the computer were the workshops on basic budgeting/financial management and individual tax preparation.

Eighteen of the original 20 women the first year completed the program satisfactorily. Success was measured by their ability to secure jobs through PROBE's list of job referrals. Presently all 18 are employed. The second year the funder stipulated that 75% of the recruited women be welfare recipients; 16 of them completed the program and over 80% have succeeded in finding employment.

Year Three the picture changed; the funders increased the required number of welfare recipients to 90% and the recruited women were single parents with uneven academic backgrounds. Among them were two Puerto Ricans with limited English skills. All of them had experienced earlier learning situations that created gaps in their ability to communicate effectively and limited their

opportunities in competing successfully in the current workforce, especially where higher levels of oral and written skills were required.

Attention to the individual needs of the student was implicit in the progam since its inception. The disparities during Year Three, however, required a revision that was sufficiently flexible to accommodate for the differences without compromising the intended outcomes. Though still simulating a work environment, the setting was not a rigidly structured one. When the students were learning on the computers, soft background music was used on the theory that it would engage the right hemisphere of the brain, thereby allowing the left side to function more effectively. Though the success of this practice was not measured, there was consensus that the music enhanced the environment.

Within this atmosphere, the objective became to enable the learners to speak and write standard English required at the work site, focusing primarily on correct subject-verb agreement, correct usage of pronoun antecedents, adjectives, plurals, and verb tense. Instead of a text, these adult learners created their own as they progressed through the basics. Each session entailed writing: directions, letters, memos, reports and, with prior agreement to do so, the women critiqued each other's work. Additional instruction was provided on an individual basis addressing specific needs. All of the written work was done on the computer.

At midyear a reading segment was initiated. The materials were newspapers and magazine articles usually pertaining to work issues and/or women's issues in the work place. Simple texts about notable women provided role models and a historical perspective. Each person read a segment out loud, then summarized

her reading. Class members were then encouraged to question the reader. The intent was to practice reading, to learn to think critically about what had been read, and to be able to accurately answer questions, to inform others.

Journal entries were also incorporated at this time. The entries were private, were not intended for classroom discussion; rather, they were to serve as a personal record of reactions to the learning experience and, ultimately, as a record of progress.

Two months before the completion of the program, the group read want ads, worked on resumes and cover letters. There were two concluding exercises:

(1) to read and respond to an actual job opening and go through a mock interview that had been prearranged;

(2) to write a set of recommendations on the skills needed in the current workforce and how to acquire them.

Two other Puerto Rican women had joined the program at midsemester. They spoke English haltingly and reluctantly. As a result, they had problems participating. Since the facilitator/coordinator is bilingual, she worked with them privately, especially with their reading, to allay their fears and dimish their embarrassment.

Evolution, Evaluation and Recommendations

At the program's inception and in the process of evaluation, the director and the coordinator reflected on the dominance of technology in our society; on the need not only for computer literacy but also for effective reading, writing and reasoning abilities. Without the latter, the employee is "stuck" at the lower employment level with few options for advancement. They also

recognized that society is not yet conditioned to a different composition of the workforce, with its influx of women and minorities representing diversified cultures and learning styles.

Programs such as PROBE's are aware of the major economic and demographic trends. The challenge for PROBE was to appropriately address the issues and identify problems, especially within a context that involved women who have been welfare dependent over a period of time, whose education had been interrupted or who had faced situations or barriers that inhibited learning.

Patience is mandatory. As one women explained, "First I have to understand what I am to learn before I try to learn it." She was one who reviewed her class work with her children, to help them, to help break the cycle of dependence. For another, the year's goal was to write one complete, grammatically correct sentence. By the end of the term she proudly generated three. She will continue working on her grammar skills at a community college.

Because of the varied academic backgrounds of the third group, a rigidly structured program would have been unproductive. Unfortunately, even one full day of communication skill practice for nine months is insufficient to compensate for years of deprivation. Nor does this period of time allow for special attention to those for whom English as a Second Language (ESL) is a need.

The success of PROBE's program, on the one hand, can be measured when completers secure decent paying jobs. Other programs can also do that, perhaps at a faster pace and for immediate placement, focusing on skills for a specific operation at the worksite . . . the "quick fix." The uniqueness of the PROBE program is its underlying goal of educating the under-served woman.

The recommendation, for funders and policymakers, is to implement

1. a flexible program focusing on the skills of the workplace. In addition to the focus on technology, employers place a priority on the ability to read, write, reason.

2. a self-paced program where skills are built slowly, solidly, according to the needs of the individual, with frequent repetition for reinforcement. The repetition, however, should be done creatively to avoid boredom, turnoff.

3. a reading program with materials that appeal and are useful to the adult woman. The readings should be summarized by the individual and discussed for meaning to strengthen (develop) reasoning, critical thinking skills.

4. verbal communication to focus on the importance of conveying messages clearly and accurately.

In addition to job preparation and job security, using PROBE's communication program as a model provides additional benefits:

It can instill a positive attitude toward learning.

It can provide a more solid base on which to build when additional skills are required.

It can enable women to serve as role models to their children. By breaking a cycle of negative response to learning, it can alter current educational outcomes.